

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 QUITO 001048

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [ASEC](#) [PGOV](#) [AMGT](#) [EC](#) [CONS](#)

SUBJECT: ECUADOR'S ABRUPT CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT: EMBASSY
PREPARATIONS, RESPONSE AND LESSONS LEARNED

1. (SBU) Summary: The abrupt overthrow of the Gutierrez government on April 20 was not unprecedented here, but tested the Embassy's capacity to respond quickly to a crisis. In this after action report we examine the lessons we learned from this experience, hoping that it will be useful for us and other posts when similar circumstances arise in the future. End summary.

Lesson One - Don't Ignore the Vice President

2. (SBU) Former Vice President and now President Palacios was a peripheral figure from early on in the Gutierrez government, disagreeing publicly with the president on many occasions. Although he was not involved in issues of particular interest to the Embassy, the Ambassador and other Embassy officials visited him, returned his calls, and maintained relations with him and his staff. We have used this ongoing relationship to great advantage in the early days of his administration to open dialog and avoid early missteps on key issues such as the Forward Operating Location (FOL) in Manta and ongoing free trade negotiations that could have tainted our ongoing relationship.

Cultivate Contacts and More Contacts

3. (SBU) Embassy officials spoke with literally hundreds of our contacts in the 24-hour period during and after the change in government. These ranged from as high as the ex-president and incoming and outgoing cabinet members to working level secretaries with up-to-date information on the fast-breaking

SIPDIS

changes within their offices. Since we had well-established relationships with these people, they answered our calls and we were able to put a certain amount of faith in the information they gave us. Access to the Ecuadorian military high command and U.S. Southcom was particularly valuable, as was access to key politicians and government officials in Quito and Guayaquil. We were also able to maintain contact with many police sources to keep informed about protests that might endanger the Embassy or US community. Without this broad range of contacts, our analyses and our actions would have been less well informed, and might have been distorted by inaccurate media reports.

Have Your House in Order Beforehand

4. (SBU) The RSO's emergency preparedness training over the past three years enabled the Mission to be ready for any eventuality. We conducted hands-on training for the emergency floor wardens, the Marine Security Detachment, the local guard force and the Ecuadorian police detailed to protect the perimeter of the Embassy compound. This ensured that there were no injuries to USG personnel during the crisis - even though hundreds of Ecuadorians were injured and there were several deaths. This training enabled us to evacuate and close the Embassy within 15 minutes on April 22 when there was a credible threat to Embassy security. We also had frequent meetings of the Emergency Action Committee (EAC) before the crisis, which allowed the Ambassador to give direct, clear instructions, and ensured that key members could exchange detailed information to coordinate responses. These meetings ensured that EAC members were well prepared on Emergency Action Plan procedures. We set up an e-mail collective for EAC members so people could remain informed between meetings. Clearly written security bulletins detailing standard operating procedures were distributed to all Embassy employees on a regular basis before and during the crisis, which pre-empted panic and helped enable a quick and calm response during the evacuation of the Embassy building.

5. (SBU) The safety of American citizens (Amcits) is always paramount in our minds. During the evolving political crisis, our existing warden net, which communicates with the large Amcit community by e-mail and fax, was used to great effect. By sending timely, accurate information, we helped control rumors and inhibit panic among the community. As a result, we received virtually no calls from Amcits resident in Ecuador during the crisis. When the Embassy opened operations at the Alternate Command Center (ACC), Consular officers established a Hotmail account to facilitate communications with wardens in the event that State Department systems failed.

16. (SBU) Early preparations made by the Management section for emergency transport and fueling, provisioning the ACC, and checking and setting up primary and alternate communications systems proved invaluable. Once the center was up and running, we found that there were not enough phone extensions at the ACC, and noted that a pre-positioned TV, radio, copier and shredder would have been useful. The need for a small public address system at the ACC is being reviewed and issues addressed above are being rectified. Management's initiative in safeguarding and transporting Embassy children who were dismissed early from several different schools was greatly appreciated by all, especially given the traffic jams and protests throughout the city on April 20. We have now initiated a process to update the list of school-age dependents and respective schools every three months and are developing "pick-up" standard operating procedures to be reviewed by and distributed to parents.

Political Asylum, Recognizing the New Government

17. (SBU) After Gutierrez fled the presidential palace, he flew to several locations before dropping temporarily out of sight. Foreseeing the possibility that he might come to the Embassy or Ambassador's residence to seek political asylum, we reviewed a recent instruction cable on the subject and called Washington to fully clarify the issue. As it happened, Gutierrez sought asylum in the Brazilian Ambassador's residence, three blocks away from USG facilities.

18. (SBU) Another issue of concern for several days after the government changeover was whether the USG would "recognize" the new Palacios government. Our consistent response was that the USG and GOE had never broken relations, and we advised Washington to respond similarly. Since that time, the State Department's legal department has confirmed that the USG does not recognize new governments, except in rare circumstances for political objectives. Ecuador's new government did not warrant special recognition or denial, and therefore the question became moot.

19. (SBU) Shortly before the Gutierrez government fell, post began a review of former high-level government officials who might flee to the US. There are already several high-profile asylum and extradition cases concerning Ecuadorians who fled to the U.S. after previous government overthrows or banking scandals. Hoping to prevent a similar occurrence, we entered one official and are considering entering others into the visa lookout system as potential flight risks.

Things We Will Do Different Next Time

10. (SBU) Post will incorporate the many lessons we learned into our Emergency Action Plan for future crises. For example, we will designate an officer to serve as a clearinghouse for both incoming and outgoing information. He/she can receive phone calls and e-mails from the USG and other interlocutors, clear cables and route information to the appropriate levels in the Embassy. We will also schedule specific times for conference calls from key Embassy officers to disseminate updates to interested parties in the State Department and other USG agencies. We will also help inform other Embassies in the region by greatly expanding our cable distribution and setting up a classified e-mail collective.

Comment

11. (SBU) In retrospect, it is easy to see how the maelstrom of April 20 and afterwards could have easily overwhelmed an unprepared Embassy. While our best efforts ultimately could not prevent an irregular change of government, other preventative actions paid off handsomely. In the two years of the Gutierrez presidency, post cultivated a wide range of contacts and had excellent access to high government officials, the military high command, and civil society leaders and opinion makers. We also prepared continuously for emergencies, taking into account the ever-present threat of protests and the risk of natural disasters. Our management team was able to respond effectively because it is held to a high standard by demanding leadership. The fact that the Embassy's team was already well integrated and had prepared beforehand for such a crisis, permitted a calm, virtually seamless mobilization and response to April 20's events.

KENNEY